

SM 11-65

Future Soviet Moves in Vietnam

27 April 1965

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

27 April 1965

SPECIAL MEMORANDUM NO. 11-65

SUBJECT: Future Soviet Moves in Vietnam

1. Step by step, the USSR is getting more deeply involved in Vietnam. The recent record clearly shows that Khrushchev's successors, while they have no clear-cut plan for solving the crisis, find that the price he was willing to pay in order to disengage from it is too high. They feel unable to bear passively the opprobrium which the Chinese are only too ready to heap upon them for abandoning the struggle in Vietnam. That struggle at its present state has two vital aspects -- the territorial integrity of a socialist country and the cause of a "national liberation" movement against the "imperialists." Because both these aspects are bound up with the USSR's position in the Communist world and in the underdeveloped areas, the post-Khrushchev leadership feels compelled to act, even in the face of risks which Khrushchev had turned away from.

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2. But the USSR is in an extremely complicated position. China is determined to prevent the Soviets from rebuilding their influence in Hanoi, or gaining any credit for supporting the DRV, unless Moscow alters its policies so radically as to confirm Chinese strategic arguments. Merely to gain a seat at the table, Moscow has had to throw overboard the US-USSR detente inherited from Khrushchev, and now it has to put more chips in the pot in order to stay in the game.

Relations with the DRV

3. The Soviets won one hand this month when a DRV delegation visited Moscow for a week of talks. The joint communique contained Vietnamese expressions of gratitude for past Soviet aid, thereby spiking Chinese charges to the contrary. And the two parties kept slightly ajar the door to negotiations, which Peiping is trying to slam, by endorsing the proposed conference on Cambodia. Kosygin's subsequent speech claimed agreement on "forms of methods of struggle ... further strengthening of the defensive capacity of socialist Vietnam, and settling the problems of Indochina on the basis of the Geneva agreements." China was clearly displeased; the DRV delegation spent several days in Peiping on its way home, but no communique marked its departure from the Chinese capital.

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4. Moscow's political gains, however, evidently were bought at some military price. The communique spoke of an "understanding on further measures designed to safeguard the security and defend the sovereignty of the DRV." It said that "appropriate measures for these purposes" had been agreed upon. This has the ring of new military plans, and in fact these passages followed directly on the statement that the "earlier understanding" on "strengthening the defense potential of the DRV" was being carried out "to the envisaged extent and procedure."

Some Possibilities

5. What forms might new military aid take? What the DRV needs most, and what the USSR can better supply than China, is assistance in air defense. Anti-aircraft weapons almost certainly will be provided in quantity, particularly for defense of that part of the DRV under continuous US attack. Radars are equally likely to appear on the list. The Soviets probably have agreed to make good DRV losses and to meet any demands for a general increase in DRV capabilities in these categories.

6. SAMs were evidently included, at least to the extent of one site, in the February agreement, and it is likely that out

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of those talks and the April meeting will come a substantial SAM deployment, complete with Soviet technicians, in northern North Vietnam. By putting up a defense of areas which the US, at least for the present, does not mean to attack, the USSR can gain considerable credit at little risk and add to the deterrents on US strikes and high-altitude reconnaissance in the north.

7. Fighter aircraft pose more difficult problems. It is almost certain that China would not make its bases available for Soviet tactical air operations. The base structure in North Vietnam is very limited, and even if the Communists counted on escaping retaliation against these bases, it is hard to see how the USSR could put enough aircraft into the area to match present US strength.

8. For these reasons, we doubt that the Soviets will dispatch tactical air units to North Vietnam. They may turn over some new aircraft to the DRV and provide some pilots and technicians. But we think that such a move would not be a prelude to early engagement with US strike aircraft. Rather, it would be intended to provide the DRV with another tangible proof of Soviet support, to add to the military deterrents on attacking northern North Vietnam, and to increase US worries that, if attacks were extended northward, matters might quickly get out of control.

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9. Another decision concerns the status of Soviet personnel sent to the DRV with these or other equipments. We have estimated that, in order to retain flexibility in the event of casualties, these personnel would appear as "volunteers" or technicians, perhaps without any official acknowledgement. The increasing Soviet involvement casts some doubt on this estimate. If Moscow wishes to jolt the US with a new commitment, and is willing to accept the risks, it might issue a statement acknowledging these personnel and warning that attacks on them would produce a response in force.

More Radical Departures

10. There is an argument for more radical Soviet measures than those suggested above. The Soviet leadership, new and untried in crisis, finds itself in perhaps the most complicated situation since the Korean War. It is attempting to influence a distant crisis in which the leading roles are played by an independent DRV determined to conquer the southern half of its nation, a hostile China which lies between the USSR and the seat of the fighting, and a US which is regularly strengthening its commitment. Thus the risks will remain largely beyond Soviet control and, worse, they may have to be borne for an indefinite period of time. These factors, exerting contradictory and growing

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pressures on Soviet policy, may eventually force it in either of two directions.

11. One direction leads to an early military confrontation in Vietnam. The Soviets might reason that this would be preferable to the prolonged acceptance of lesser but still substantial risks. Thus they might deploy to Vietnam military forces of a type, and on a scale, intended to convince the US that it could continue bombing the DRV only at very high risk. Such Soviet forces could include the air defense units mentioned above, ground units, a variety of other technical personnel, and coastal naval vessels. Submarines might be deployed to the South China Sea. Conceivably they could include light bombers or surface-to-surface missiles intended, not for their military utility, but for shock effect to reinforce the impression of a farreaching Soviet commitment requiring an immediate US retreat.

12. This would be a very dangerous course of action, and the USSR might instead move in the opposite direction. In their dilemma, perhaps sharpened by some new US moves, the new Soviet leaders might come to decide that Khrushchev was right after all, that the Soviet Union could not sustain a substantial commitment in Southeast Asia without taking on unacceptable risks. Thus

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they might choose gradually to disengage, covering their military non-support with vigorous diplomacy and propaganda on behalf of Hanoi and the Viet Cong.

13. These alternatives -- one risky, the other costly -- are very unattractive. The Soviets will wish to steer a middle course between them for as long as possible, and some sort of middle course is probably what emerged out of the April meeting in Moscow. But if the crisis persists at present or higher levels of risk, indecisiveness, and complication, the middle way may not survive.

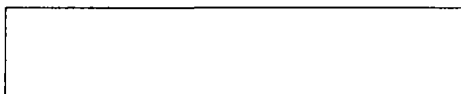
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